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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary unit focuses on the Indian epic, "The Ramayana," and explores Indian mythology, art forms, and storytelling methods. The unit is designed for middle school students but could be adapted to other levels. This unit could be incorporated with a study of India's land, history and geography. An overview of Indian mythology, how that mythology is transmitted, and a brief recount of the story of "The Ramayana" are included, with a project planning sheet for students. (EH)

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CURRICULUM PROJECTS DEVELOPED
by
1995 SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

1995 SEMINAR: UNDERSTANDING INDIA AND HER ETHOS

THE RAMAYANA

Patti Crouch

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CURRICULUM PROJECT FOR

1995 SEMINAR: UNDERSTANDING INDIA AND HER ETHOS

THE RAMAYANA

Patti Crouch
October 14, 1995

CURRICULUM PROJECT - THE RAMAYANA

OVERVIEW:

This project is an inter-disciplinary unit focusing on the Indian epic, the Ramayana, and exploring Indian mythology, art forms, and storytelling methods. The goals of the unit are as follows:

1) to acquaint students with major figures of Indian mythology;
2) to expose students to The Ramayana and its cultural importance;
3) to explore various methods of storytelling and representation;
4) to give students the opportunity to try out various storytelling or artistic methods in their own retelling of The Ramayana.

This unit is designed for middle school students, though it could easily be adapted for other levels. Ideally, this unit would follow or coincide with a study of India's land and history. Because of the difficulty in formatting such information, the unit does not include graphs, charts or illustrations. Teachers are encouraged to seek out illustrations from books on their own.

BACKGROUND:

INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

The Hindu pantheon is made up of many fascinating gods--far too many to cover in a unit of this nature. The Hindu trinity is composed of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Although these gods are not involved in the story of The Ramayana to the extent that the Greek gods are in the story of the Trojan war, a basic knowledge of the three main gods will help students in studying examples of Indian art and mythology.

Brahma, the Creator, has four heads which face in each of the four directions, symbolizing his role as the creator of the universe. He is often shown seated on a lotus, with a rosary, palm leaves, a pot of water, and the sacred book, the Vedas. The lotus flower, which blooms beautifully though it grows out of mud and slime, symbolizes that people should also be pure, regardless of their surroundings. Brahma rides on a sacred swan named Hamsa, and his consort is Saraswathi, the goddess of wisdom and learning.

Vishnu, the Preserver, takes on an earthly form in times of great need or danger. In one incarnation he was a giant fish; later he was a giant turtle, then a boar. One of his human incarnations is Lord Krishna; another is Rama of The Ramayana. Vishnu is depicted as lying on a cobra with many heads which floats in an ocean of milk. His symbols are the disc, the conch shell, the mace and the lotus. On the conch, he plays music that removes all ignorance; with the disc and mace, he maintains order and destroys evil. Vishnu rides on a copper eagle named Garuda, and his consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity.

Shiva, the Destroyer, is also known as the King of Dancers, and he is often shown dancing on top of a demon. The sacred Ganges River flows from his hair, and he sometimes wears a garland of skulls, symbolizing that everyone must face death. Shiva's symbols are the drum of creative energy and activity, the deer, fire, and the trident. He rides on a bull named Nandi, and his consort is Parvati.

TRANSMISSION OF MYTHOLOGY

Images of mythological figures and stories show up everywhere in India. They are found in the expected places such as the magnificent bas relief carvings, paintings and statues of Hindu temples, but also in less expected places such as shop signs or talcum powder cans. An awareness of the gods and of the great stories of Indian mythology runs through every part of Indian life. While this overview is limited again by written format, it will explore the various ways in which stories of India are transmitted.

Representations of gods and goddess, and scenes from myths are consistent subjects of traditional Indian art. The famous rock-carved temples of Ajunta and Ellora offer beautiful examples of these types of carvings, some of which show the episodes of an entire story in bas relief sculpture. On a more common level, the gods and stories appear in advertisements, storybooks, comic books, papier-mache dolls, masks, and various toys.

Mythology is the backbone of India's performance arts, both folk and classical. Myths are the subjects of classical dance forms such as Kathakali and Kathak, which combine dance, mime, percussion and pageantry to present stories. Myths are also presented through various kinds of folk performances. Traditionally, folk performers in villages transmitted myths and stories in a combination of storytelling and art. Some used puppetry; others told stories by using props such as scrolls and storyboxes.

Storyboxes are ingeniously constructed miniature houses which open up panel by panel to reveal episodes from a famous story. Often the boxes are nearly as tall as the storyteller, and are brightly painted with scenes from the story. The storyteller points to the front panels, indicating particular figures as he comes to that part of the story. When he reaches the end of the first panel, he swings the entire front of the box aside to reveal drawings on the back of the panel. When those are finished, he indicates the drawings on the next panel, hinged and folded behind the first. The storyteller continues to open and unfold panels, tell the stories depicted on both sides, and remove sections until he reaches the very back of the box, which houses carved figures from the story. Smaller versions of these boxes are now sold in toy stores.

Story scrolls operate on a similar, if simplified, fashion as storyboxes. The scrolls are long strips of canvas or paper on canvas a foot or more in width, onto which are painted scenes from famous stories. Often using a partner to hold the scroll, the storyteller unrolls the first part of the scroll, pointing to painted panels as he sings the story. As he progresses in the story, he simply rolls up the "told" portion and allows more of the "untold" portion to show.

THE RAMAYANA

The great epic, The Ramayana, written by Valmiki in 350 B.C., is one of the most important stories of Indian mythology.

The Ramayana tells the story of Rama, the faithful and beloved prince who is exiled to the forest for fourteen years before he can claim his father's throne. He is accompanied by his beautiful wife Sita and his devoted brother, Lakshmana. While in the forest, Rama and Lakshmana are lured away from their hermitage by the trickery of the ten-headed demon Ravana, who abducts Sita and takes her back to his island kingdom, Lanka. There he tries to force her to marry him--to no avail.

When Rama and Lakshmana find Sita missing, they are crushed by despair until a kindly old vulture named Jatayu and a monkey named Hanuman come to their aid and help discover what happened. Hanuman leaps over to Lanka, finds Sita, and reassures her that help is on the way. He also gets captured, has his tail set on fire, and manages to spy on and burn much of the town of Trikoot before leaping away.

When Rama finds out what has happened, he and Hanuman's friends, an army of monkeys, set out to get Sita back and punish Ravana for his wickedness. During the days of fierce fighting which follow, the monkeys build a bridge to the island, both sides have routs and victories, an entire mountain is moved to bring back healing herbs, a massive, sleepy giant is roused for battle, and finally Rama succeeds in killing Ravana.

At the end of the story, Western readers may be outraged to find that Rama rejects Sita because her purity has been compromised by her imprisonment by another man. Sita promptly throws herself in a fire, asking the gods to prove her virtue. When the flames surround her and yet leave her untouched, Rama knows that she has been pure. They reunite, return to Ayodhya, and live in peace and happiness.

The Ramayana is used by Hindus to present the ideas of more philosophical religious works in a format understandable to everyone. Because of its story format, this important text can be transmitted in a variety of ways, particularly to those who cannot read or write. Rama, the hero of the story, embodies perfection in his loyalty, strength and righteousness, and his rule of Ayodhya is the embodiment of the perfect kingdom.

In October, Indians celebrate Dussehra, the Feast of Victory, in honor of Rama's victory over evil. Rama statues are decorated with marigold garlands, and clay or paper images of his enemy, Ravana, are ceremoniously destroyed. On this day (and throughout the year, actually), the story The Ramayana is retold in story, songs and plays.

Recently in India, a television version of The Ramayana was created and aired weekly. Although the quality of the production was not excellent, people clambered to neighbors or shops with television sets to watch. Anyone walking down the street during the hour of the show would find people lined up six deep, crowded around a tiny TV screen in the back of a shop.

THE PROJECT:

For the culminating project, student groups will take portions of The Ramayana and present them to their classmates using one of the visual or performing arts formats introduced earlier. Teachers may use some or all of the preceding background materials to acquaint their students with some aspects of Indian art and mythology.

Teachers may then distribute copies of The Ramayana to their students or (more economically) read The Ramayana aloud to them. Several good versions are listed in the bibliography. The story could be divided into sections by the number of pages, or the following episodic divisions could be used:

1. Birth of Rama and brothers; first battles; marriage to Sita
2. Rama's exile; death of his father, Dashratha; the forest home
3. Siva's abduction; Hanuman's arrival; the search for Sita
4. Hanuman in Lanka; preparations for battle
5. The battle; death of Ravana
6. Return to Ayodhya

The groups would be responsible for presenting their section to the class. The following assignment sheet could be given to students to help them structure their projects.

RAMAYANA PROJECT

INTRODUCTION: In this project, you will be assigned as section of The Ramayana to perform or present to the class. You may choose any of the formats we have discussed. For example, you might do a puppet show, create a story scroll, do a dance or mime presentation, construct a storybox, or make a series of drawings or sculptures. The goal of your project should be to make your part of the story come alive for your audience.

Every project must have the following parts:

1. A verbal introduction of story, group members, roles, etc.
2. A performance or visual display (drama, sculpture, dance, box, etc.)
3. Narration, script or singing to provide explanation
4. Artwork, props (could be your scroll or box), or costumes

To use your time effectively, follow these steps:

1. Reread your section and take brief notes on characters, events, setting.
2. Decide what format would best use the talents of your group and best share your part of the story with the class.
3. Divide responsibilities between group members so that everyone has something to be doing at all times. Responsibilities should be divided both for preparation and for presentation.
4. Create your script, props, artwork, costumes, etc.
5. Write up an introduction for your section to present to the class.
6. Rehearse every part of your presentation.
7. Present your section as professionally as possible.

Fill in the following worksheet to get started:

STUDENT PLANNING SHEET

1. What happens in our section of the story? _____

2. What format do we want to use to retell this part? _____

3. Where does it take place--specifically? _____

4. How will we represent that (with a background, lighting, props, etc.)?

5. Who are the main characters in our section? What are they like?

character	description

6. Who will take care of what responsibilities for our project?

group member	job

7. What materials will we need to make, borrow, or bring from home?

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